

**Paolo Ceola**

**WAR ON THE SCREEN**  
**Democracy and arms seen through films**

**1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

It is impossible not to take the language of the cinema into consideration if one wants to understand the nineteen hundreds. This statement is even more valid when contemporary war is examined under a magnifying glass: the past century was, unfortunately, rife with wars while at the same time being characterised by the tumultuous evolution of the mass media: therefore, considering that from Homer's Iliad onwards the human urge to narrate has favoured the theme of war, it is easy to comprehend why war movies represent a large proportion of those filmed and shown throughout the last century and to this day.

The production was so copious that it is impossible to handle the entire question within the limits of an essay (a whole volume would hardly suffice) and one is compelled to be selective and, in so far as is possible, original. Consequently, one might as well avoid discussing how the cinema speaks of war and dwell rather on what war reveals of itself through the medium of cinema. In brief, we have endeavoured to examine the war phenomenon neither through books nor the testimony of protagonists but through films, identifying certain themes, which appeared to us to be interesting.

One crucial point, for example, is represented by the relationship between war and democracy. If the latter may be defined as the victory of reason over arms and, by contrast, war arises when the reason for arms proves superior it is obvious that some interesting considerations emerge from their dialectical relationship. Within the world of cinema this is further reinforced by the fact that the very country, host to the world's largest film industry has found itself, despite being a consolidated democracy, fighting many enemies wishing to maintain its leadership in world affairs. It can't be just a simple coincidence that the most interesting and stimulating war films are of American production. This does not imply that excellent films on war have not been produced by other countries (in fact, many of them are genuine masterpieces) but there is no doubt that, if we want to focus on this theme, we must look towards the United States.

**2. Democracy at war. First part: the resistance of values (*Saving Private Ryan, The Thin Red Line, Flags of our Fathers.*)**

**2. 1 *Saving Private Ryan*, USA, 1998. Directed by Steven Spielberg.**

*Saving Private Ryan* is not a film about war, but a film about **values**: filtered, moulded and conditioned by the war. I believe Spielberg tries to introduce his own personal convictions into the broader theme for the purpose of recovering a certain kind of collective ethics. The American director is convinced that saving a man's life is equivalent to saving the world (this is obvious from *Schindler's List* onwards); in other words, man's duty, when surrounded by rife violence, and his ultimate chance to redeem the situation from total moral degeneration is to intervene there and then to save a part of the human race (even if only a single individual) as though it were the entire race. This way of thinking and acting represents the last possible resort, a new point of departure to change the general course of things and ward off the victory of evil. This is a genuinely democratic concept (and obviously a Western precept of Christian origin) because only Democracy, in its theory and ideology, considers the individual as being equally important as the universe of humans: this recognition is its underlying principle. Therefore, Ryan is comparable to one of the many (or the few, depending on how the question is viewed, whether with greater optimism or pessimism) Jews saved by Schindler; whereas in that case Nazism represents the universal totality of evil, here war is the vehicle by which it is conveyed.

There is a series of other ethical principles, which follow as corollary to the value of recovering human dignity as a whole by saving a single individual. One is that values **must** be passed on through the generations: this ideal passage of testimony over time and throughout the generations is clearly and firmly underlined in the two Spielberg films mentioned. Another important value seems to me to be that life or the ethical conception of life represents a **gift** that may be granted once only and must be deserved: anyone who refuses it or wastes it does not have the right to a second chance. In fact, the German soldier who is spared the first time is later killed for having gone back to fighting .

<sup>1</sup> This essay is composed of original contributions and the revision of some film records (*Saving Private Ryan, Fail Safe, Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter, Full Metal Jacket*), which have already featured in *Il labirinto: saggi sulla guerra contemporanea*, Naples, Liguori, 2002. I wish to thank Liguori publishers for having given me permission to use previously published texts. A wider version is on the net, at: [scribd.com](http://scribd.com) and [bibliomil.com](http://bibliomil.com). I also wish to thank Mary Brassil for the translation of the whole paper, except the review of *The Hurt Locker*, translated by me...And you will notice the difference!

What has this universe of values, which might be merely exclusive to Spielberg, to do with “democracy in arms”? First of all, it must be said that Spielberg’s moral message seems to be heavily laden with nostalgia: I think the director is conjuring up the “high” moments and details of Western culture and History (the struggle against Nazism in *Schindler* and *Ryan*, the struggle against slavery in *Amistad* but also the rebellion of the cars in *Duel* or of Nature in *Jaws* and the need to be children if one wishes to fully encounter the totally “Other” as in *E.T.*) because he feels like all of us feel that the West is losing its memory of, and inspiration from, its best memories.

The recovery of wartime memories in *Ryan*, such as the attention for the single individual, the struggle against absolute and fanatic conceptions, mercy for the fighters (made evident by the horror exposed without the slightest disguise or a hint of ideological mysticism) defines in my opinion **a certain way of making war characteristic of democracies**. This approach coexists, naturally and shamefully, with the *made in the West* atrocities (it hardly needs to be mentioned given that one sees the war crimes in the film committed by Americans, like the killing of soldiers who have surrendered) and has historically and theoretically had the chance to reveal itself. This argument will be clearer when we have examined the main characters of the film.

Let’s begin with Captain Miller (Tom Hanks). Miller, despite being an intellectual, a good husband, a worthy citizen and a peaceful man in his civilian life, wrapped up in that air of mediocrity of the common man (and, it may be deduced, as such the selected target for the malicious mockery in the propaganda of all the anti democracy military policies) is such an excellent soldier that he is in charge of a squad of *Rangers*, one of the specialities of the *elite* in the American army. He does what History has ordained for him, but he does not get swept away and keeps, even if it is at the expense of his physical and nervous health, his control, rationality and humanity in his decisions. In this sense, Miller is the exact prototype of the military hero of Democracy. He **knows** that every time he kills or orders to kill the process of dehumanisation within him is becoming more embedded. His words speak clear:

*“Sometimes I wonder if I’ve changed so much, my wife will ever recognize me whenever I get back to her. And how I’ll be able to...to tell her about days like today [...] I just know, every man I kill, the farther from home I feel”*

He is a hero because of this: his awareness and his style are priceless. All this is even more evident if we look at the specific moral dilemmas, which he has to face. In particular, when the last of the Ryan boys is found the situation (which seemed settled since the mission had been accomplished) takes a turn, like they say in the film, decidedly in the surreal direction. Ryan refuses to leave his mates<sup>2</sup> involved in safeguarding a bridge, which had become fundamental strategically. Apparently, Miller has only two alternatives ahead of him. Either he compels Ryan to follow him and return to the back streets, going against the wishes of the young man and further stripping the already weak defence at the post or he could leave Ryan there where he is, disobeying orders and exposing the chap to the almost certain prospect of death. Miller chooses a third solution, hybrid though ethically and militarily rational, he will contribute with his men to defending the bridge together with Ryan and his few companions, thus managing to increase the boy’s probability of survival, to respect his will and to defend an essential, strategic post. Miller’s is an authentic *beau geste*, a beautiful gesture made without too much ado and without bombast. He doesn’t go against the orders of his superiors, or rather he does so to the extent that on the one hand he adapts to the more pressing contingencies of the war while, on the other hand, allowing Ryan not to lose respect for himself or his companions. In reality Miller saves the boy twice over, physically and spiritually. It is sad that Miller should pay for being a soldier and (anti) hero with his life, in the most obsolete meaning of the term. His is a death that doesn’t touch the spectator’s more emotional cords (like the harrowing death of the nurse of the team) but it is equally moving because the testimony has a real flavour. I don’t wish to be rhetoric but of all the images of dying soldiers surrounding us, often afflicted in appearance, these seem the most suitable to form an icon, destined to represent the sacrifice of a good soldier and a fine man.

Upham, the little soldier-translator thrown into an experience too complex for him, represents the other side of Democracy. He, too, is an intellectual and he behaves in most of the story exactly like the despicable machos and warmongers wish the intellectuals would behave in war. He lets himself be overcome by shock: fear grips him during combat to such an extent that he causes the death of some companions. This character represents, to my mind, the moral and juridical conscience of the West when it is too engrossed in observing itself and its own inner coherence. Despite proving to be efficacious at the time of the release of the German soldier and preventing for the sake of the *goddam rules* that a war crime be committed, he risks sparking off a catastrophe because of his exaggerated goodness and respect for ethics for its own sake. That Upham should be the executor of the freed German and that not only did he go back to fighting, but he personally killed those who had freed him is singular and indicative of the fact that Spielberg has a “militant” vision of democracy. Besides, this execution is a cold blooded, hands-up murder, which is a violation of the same rules enforced by the American as an absolute priority in the first place. I believe we may infer from this that Spielberg does not place certain values above all others unconditionally, in particular, the more noble and legalistic ones, but retains that they become effective only in the context of collective human behaviour. This episode leads to the inevitable conclusion that the film, while not being one of militarism or propaganda, it is not a film of pacifism either.

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<sup>2</sup> Solving one’s own moral dilemma according to “the shame culture”, means not abandoning companions because death is preferable to the dishonour of not doing your duty.

The last point we are going to take into consideration is the form of the film, which might be defined as “epic realism”. This expression is epigrammatic because, in theory, there is nothing realistic about epic. It is an idealised form of narration, story telling where what is supposed to be ousted will be. It is for this reason that epic is the story of war: the symbolic investment by people in relating fighting experiences is indispensable and enormous. Nowadays it is virtually impossible to be epic, or so it has been up to now for all but Spielberg. This is because war is such that when one endeavours to depict it as what it is not one ends up using the most devastating rhetoric and being unintentionally comic, because these days everything is *fiction*, that is, a bastardised and mystified form of narration, including the “reality” of news editions. In order to restore some moral integrity to epic Spielberg resorts to the most philologically accurate form of narration ever seen without implying values between the lines, allowing few signs of their existence to filter through, such as the pallid and bloody American Flag. *Ryan* does not celebrate military values but **civil ones in uniform**. Therefore, the war is not an idealised one: the war is what it is in reality and what it is turned into, by the best of men while fighting it. This kind of epic is in sharp contrast with that of militarism, where everybody is a hero and all that is required is to put on a uniform and believe-obey-fight. Nobody in *Ryan* is a hero in the old style. It is something you become, soldier or not, in so far as you remain faithful to the deepest and most enduring values of humanity.

## 2.2 *The Thin Red Line*, USA, 1998. Directed by Terrence Malick.

During the campaign for the conquest of Guadalcanal in 1942, the soldier Witt first flees from the ranks and takes refuge among the natives and then, after being found he winds up working as a stretcher bearer and later returns to fighting, seeing many of his companions fall; he will sacrifice himself to protect their retreat. All this happens during the interaction of the many different characters in the context of a film where there is a lot of conversation, even off the field, so that the soldiers’ thoughts are expressed in words. Malick’s film, like that of Spielberg, is a film about values more than war and, in fact, the historic setting of the matter is rather vague. We are in the middle of a jungle somewhere in the Pacific Ocean but the location could have been different. This film is the antipode of *Saving Private Ryan* as regards the sphere of values.

The contrast between these two films is so radical that they should be seen one after the other to understand the difference that exists between anti-Fascism and Pacifism.

As already stated, *The Thin Red Line* commits much of its meaning to words expressed in soliloquies and dialogues; the characters in themselves are rather traditional: the hero is insecure and tormented, the officials are cynical and arrogant (except for one, who meets with one of his superiors and is dismissed for having spared his men), soldier Witt’s choir of comrades. The other protagonist of the film is nature, considered in its eternal mechanism of creation and destruction:

*“What’s this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself, the land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power but two?”*

They are the first words of the film with which Witt declares his initial disorientation. None of his choices at the beginning seem to be definite and convinced, he presents in the opening stages with the intention of deserting, but he recovers from this state basically unharmed only to become a stretcher-bearer and later to take part in the fighting. He is clearly on a journey within himself, where the only stable reference point seems to be his love for his wife, this too is not without sentimentalism and illusion, as his wife then manages to betray him somewhat shamelessly.

What is Witt looking for? A way, it would seem for much of the film, to collocate the massacre among men at war in a kind of superior design, which has some sense to it, rather than a justification. At the beginning death seems meaningful and not frightening, only if it is “natural” like his mother’s. He appears to recognise an almost primordial authenticity in the community of natives where he has taken refuge, depicted in a kind of Eden by a lover of the wilds. It is the calmness before death that holds the meaning of immortality. The following events, consisting in ferocious fighting and being left by his wife, prompt him to go in the direction of suicide, as though sacrificing himself in favour of his companions could on one hand cleanse him of having served in an army and having contributed to killing many human beings, and on the other, transport him through this gesture of love to a context of greater meaning, far from the senseless carnage before his eyes.

I think there is no doubt but that the soldier Witt is an idealist. Terrence Malick places him in conflict with a realism of a very cynical and almost inhuman brand. The interviews with Sergeant Major Welsh, his immediate superior, whose emotional shell will be cracked by the death of Witt, are evidence of this:

*“I can take anything you dish out. I’m twice the man you are”,*

says Witt to his sergeant with a certain arrogance in the first conversation after being captured, and the sergeant’s answers:

*“In this world a man himself is nothing and there ain’t no world but this one”. [...] “We’re living in a world that’s blowing itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange it. In a situation like that all a man can do is shut his eyes and let nothing touch him. Look out for himself”*

denote a remarkable distance between the two. Witt's reflections have naturally been deepened dramatically by his experience of the fighting. At the moment of the disembarkation to which the Japanese do not offer opposition he wonders:

*"Who are you to live in all these many forms? Your death that captures all. You, too, are the source of all that's gonna be born. Your glory, mercy, peace, truth. You give calm a spirit, understanding, courage, the contented heart. Maybe all men got one big soul who everybody's a part of; all faces of the same man. One big self. Everyone looking for salvation by himself. Each like a coal dawn from the fire".*

during a fierce man to man battle (in which Malick's brilliance as a director reaches its peak) mercy and horror mix indelibly marking the most painful stage in the existential journey of the protagonist:

*"This great evil. Where's it come from? How'd it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who's doing this? Who's killing us? Robbing us of life and light? Mocking us with the sight of what we might have known? Does our ruin benefit the Earth? Does it help the grass to grow or the sun to shine? Is this darkness in you, too? Have you passed through this night?"*

The essential point of the question regarding the comparison, and the confrontation of *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan*, as we have previously said, as to why the former should be considered Pacifist and the latter anti-Fascist does not lie in their reporting of the horrors of war. Spielberg's film contains enough to satisfy the most demanding palate. The real discriminating factor is Malick's conception of Realism, which could be defined as everything-that-is-outside-of-Witt; it's as though the director's thought patterns consisted of Good, which is what Witt aims at; the travelling hero Ulysses is within Witt and everything beyond Witt, everything that opposes him along his journey represents Evil, the army, History, politics, the unfathomable world and Nature. Whereas Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* faces reality, he rides it like a surfer or a master of Zen, Witt runs away, fights against it, despises it. We dare to say this is the typical way of thinking of the Pacifist: evil represents reality, it must be fought on the basis of intransigent ideals without ever resorting to compromise. The world has to be saved: individuals like Miller are of the conviction that at the most we can save ourselves (in terms of dignity and not in terms of physical survival).

Here we are not interested in assessing validity, querying whether Pacifism is superior to anti-Fascism or vice versa; they represent two moral positions, indispensable for any Democracy. We are solely interested in remarking on the profound difference in mental identity of the two leading figures in the films. One can't help thinking while watching the end of Malick's beautiful film that there is nothing new to be learned from it but simply that it confirms the truth, that war is a horrible thing and taken so much for granted that something more should be presented to the spectator.

## 2. 3 *Flags of Our Fathers*, USA, 2006. Directed by Clint Eastwood

*"Every jackass thinks he knows what war is, especially those who have never been in one. We like things nice and simple: good and evil, heroes and villains. There's always plenty of both. Most of the time, they are not who we think they are."*

The first impression we get when we compare *Saving Private Ryan* and *Flags of Our Fathers* is that what counts in the first of the two, what sets in motion both the narrative mechanism and the fundamental meaning of the film is the effective reality, the life lived by the leading characters whereas in the second this role is played by an image (the famous photograph of the marines raising the flag on Mount Suribachi at Iwo Jima) open to interpretation and exploitation.

Eastwood's film is a complete comedy (or tragedy) about mistakes and ambiguities, which give rise to misunderstandings and deceit: the photo is misinterpreted, the role assigned to the heroes of Iwo Jima is ambiguous, public opinion is manipulated by the synergy between the mass media and the political powers.

As is well-known, the film tells of how those who are believed to be responsible for the famous raising of the flag on Suribachi are being taken around America on an exhausting tour trying to raise funds to support the war; but the group of veterans is not at all complete, in fact some of the leading characters of the famous event of the photo have died and there are some serious doubts as regards the participation of certain soldiers. Despite this, the three surviving heroes are summoned to their fatherland to repeat an infinite number of times the same gestures made on the front and to repeat the same words uttered and the same propaganda slogans infinite times. This will eventually have a devastating effect on one of them, Ira Hayes, the "native", who out of a sense of guilt for having survived and overwhelmed by the mediocrity of life at home will die soon after the end of the war from alcoholism. Everyone learns a basic fact: that the essence of the experience of war, its most inherent truths, it's more purely existential lessons can't be transmitted to those who haven't experienced it, not even when it's a question of public opinion in a democratic country.

The image is what counts, the perception, the manipulated account and not the real experience. It is a film with a much sadder and disenchanted moral than that which animates Spielberg's work, a heroic and epic film in its own way, as we have already stated. I think one may claim that Miller and his men, though immersed in military organization and war, are not as forsaken as Eastwood's soldiers. Miller and his men fight and die for values shared by the fatherland and which can be left as a legacy for future generations. The protagonists of *Flags of Our Fathers* are mute, they can't relate their truth but are restricted to repeating the official one. In this sense the film contains a paradigmatic scene; when a soldier falls into the sea from the boat that was carrying him with some companions on the way towards Iwo Jima, none of the boats stop to rescue him because the embarkation plan doesn't allow for delays; someone remarks:

*"They're not gonna stop. None of them are. They can't. So much for 'no man left behind'."*

In the case of this film the values that emerge during the war develop inside the community of soldiers; the solidarity among comrades is more motivating than their love for the fatherland, or so the propaganda would suggest. Therefore, the war as experienced by the soldiers is in contrast with the stories told at home and consequently the war seems practically unknown or at any rate hard to relate, as the opening words quoted above demonstrate. This is further confirmation of the fact that the special treatment reserved for the heroes of Iwo Jima is purely instrumental and downright cruel as when racist attitudes are revealed towards the Red Indian, Hayes.

### **3. Democracy at war. Second part: upside down flag (*In the Valley of Elah, Redacted*)**

#### **3.1 *In the Valley of Elah*, USA, 2007. Directed by Paul Haggis.**

Raising a flag turned the wrong way, upside down, means danger. The same flag we saw fluttering limply, somewhat faded, at the end of Spielberg's film, which inspired the story told by Eastwood, is the symbol, the icon of the work by Haggis. Hank Deerfield, a war survivor having very strong feelings of patriotism starts looking for his son Mike who has just returned from Iraq and is inexplicably absent from his division. When the boy's carbonised and mutilated corpse is found abandoned in a field, his father begins to search stubbornly for the truth, fighting against the attempts at sidetracking him and the conspiracy of silence among the Armed Forces. The discovery for Hank and his wife, who had already lost a son while he was in the army, involves a double tragedy; he was killed by his own companions for futile reasons and Mike himself was guilty of serious war crime, having tortured injured Iraqis.

According to the Bible, the valley of Elah is where David and Goliath fought; here there are several Davids and Goliaths and they have various identities. Certainly, the American army is Goliath when faced with the urban guerrilla warfare of the Iraqi insurgents. Hank, the leading character, could cover both roles; David when up against the bureaucracy and Goliath when he is defeated by the truth. Such a defeat for a man so completely absorbed by patriotic ideals represents a total disillusionment with his own country, so much so that it is that very same man who raises the American flag upside down, symbol of danger for a society that has lost track of its most important values.

The solitude of the most important characters in the film is particularly impressive; all of them have a sense of tragedy and war in common, in a society where the abolition of conscription prevents a preliminary discussion of the reasons for entering into a war, socialization and working out of rehabilitation for both survivors and bereaved families. We get the impression of indifference, incompleteness, fragmentation and alienation through the icy light, the dominant shade of the film, on the part of North American society towards world politics and history presented to us in our homes.

Great war films are not measured by the number and rumble of its explosions but by knowing how to relate the war as a complex phenomenon, that is, as an expression of the collective, material and spiritual life of men or, in other words, as a social and political phenomenon in the broad sense. In this war film very little is seen of the fighting in the battlefield and yet it lurks in every single scene and is imprinted on the face of every single character. The fact that the film was inspired by a real event further confirms this idea.

Another important theme of the film is the progressive difficulty in relating the war; it almost seems as though the guys at the front, or those who have just come back, have trouble relating to the world of those who stayed at home, they seem like a choir of stammering boys before adults who can't understand them. There is nothing new in this; the war has always been difficult to impart and relate, especially for those who have experienced it directly, but the remarkable thing is that this happens in a society where the mass media is a means of communication not just for the masses but also of the masses. These days anyone can put a report together or record history in its making, by simply using a mobile phone or a mini camera. The result is one aphasic cacophony, a continuous blathering without any sense. De Palma's contemporary film takes this phenomenon to its extreme.

#### **3. 2 *Redacted*, USA/Canada, 2007, Directed by Brian De Palma.**

The only real fact in this film that actually did occur is the pretext for the story: in March, 2006 some American soldiers stationed to the south of Baghdad raped a fifteen-year-old girl, then killed her and her entire family. Otherwise, *Redacted* could be defined as a "non-film" in that, it was put together by using contributions from other media sources (mainly internet), a fictitious report made by a troop of fake French soldiers, amateur coverage by an actor (fake too, in

that he is an actor), fake photos (but horrifyingly and mercilessly genuine more than authentic pictures) of coincidental victims of the American bomb attacks. In reality, the spectator is looking at a film shot by a cameraman who photographs the scenes created by other media sources. Since however we are at the cinema, we may tranquilly state that the philological concern is exactly the same as that of other films; the purpose is to produce a documentary, even if the success is at times comparable with Spielberg. The film helps us understand many things about the “state of war” at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The stress to which the soldiers are subject in an environment of urban guerrilla warfare is very well described: the difficulty in distinguishing the enemy, in predicting his movements, long, tedious hours perforated with moments of terror, civilians who are not such in ethical terms but simply enemies, even if not capable of causing harm.

Just like the civilians in their homeland *In The Valley of Elah* these guys are desperately lonely. One striking aspect of De Palma’s film is the almost total absence of officials with a grade superior to tenant. The only ones who enter the picture are an army psychologist and two other officials who question the words of the soldier who decided not to remain silent; otherwise no official characters appear. So we are far removed from war films of the American tradition up to recent times, which always presented despicable officials (though these figures were still more common in European films), together with a captain, a major or a general, genuinely interested in the fate of his subjects.

De Palma tells us something novel about the relationship between the media and violence; whereas, by and large, the intervention of television in the Vietnam War contributed to the creation of dissent towards the war and in the nineties media management succeeded in creating a consensus towards the use of violence, this film gives the impression that the camera itself creates the violence. Not only does the decision to carry out the rape get filmed by an amateur cameraman but the camera owner himself decides to participate in the action too, to render his video-diary of the war more exciting and help him to be given a place on a course of film studies after military service.

It can’t be said that *Redacted* offers many reasons for consolation: Salazar the amateur director admits his malaise in the form of nightmares to the army psychologist and crying, proclaims that everyone is making and watching videos and nobody is doing anything to better the situation but, soon afterwards, he is killed barbarically. After having spoken to his father, a Bush supporter, soldier McCoy posts his own accusation on Internet anonymously (wearing a hood like an Islamic terrorist) and as soon as gets back home he confesses crying (before a television camera, as usual) that he saw and did really horrible things, of which will never be able to free himself. The terrible thing is that they are not villains like Rush and Flake and they don’t seem like they are serving in the army of a big democracy: apart from the conversations between them (basically, the conversations among all soldiers, whatever their flag, are more or less the same) and the remoteness of the officials (which we have already mentioned) the dreadful thing is that a sense of collectively shared ethics, either at the front or at home is totally absent. Here, we really are at the antipodes in relation to *Saving Private Ryan*: not in the sense that Spielberg and De Palma have opposing ethical perceptions but in the sense that the antifascism the former commemorates and seems almost to invoke is probably considered lost forever by the latter. Therefore, both these films tell us that war, contemporary war is defeating Democracy, destroying it both by making itself a desirable option in foreign policy and aggravating problems peculiar to the civil society (the role of the media, crisis as regards how representative it is, etc... ).

The question hasn’t arisen simply because of terminating compulsory conscription, which, despite its many advantages, did however remove the privilege of considering the war as a *res publica*, a public matter; In *Saving Private Ryan* war, that is evil, is the price man pays for his dignity: there is endless debate about war as an inevitable evil for the destruction of other evil and men finding themselves all for each other because they share the same values. In De Palma’s film and in that of Haggis the lack of socialization during the war brutalizes the soldiers and leads to their reification as a fighting force and individuals, so that they wind up killing their fellow fighters, hanging themselves, inflicting torture and committing rape. These soldiers abandoned to themselves are almost robotic morons; it’s significant that Mike the soldier killed by his own fellow fighters in *The Valley of Elah* has to get out of his own armoured vehicle to realise he has killed a civilian.

The ideological connotation of the enemy in the Second World War and even in Vietnam was more precise, it was easier to distinguish and therefore, discerning a sense to the war was more straightforward and hence the redemption for violence could be managed collectively through ideals and stronger motivations. In the last films we have cited, redemption is left to the individual and, therefore, comports a higher price or perhaps, results impossible or self-destructive. If the community of both the armed forces and civilian society neither hears nor sees the war, the soldiers who feel distress or remorse resemble Oedipus, forced to pull out his eyes as a punishment.

In conclusion, if it may be stated that North America (and in a broader sense, the West) is not a militarised society, it is then plausible that in the case of a war the country is defenceless: it will sustain the effects not having the strength to provide a collective response of political and ethical effect. Technology, the increasing mechanization of all the processes involved in the decision-making, preparation and management of the conflict only complicates the problem.

#### 4 Atoms and photographs (*Fail Safe, Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*)

##### 4.1 *Fail Safe*, USA, 1964. Directed by Sidney Lumet.

A squadron of American bombers, *B58 Hustler*, full of atomic bombs, receive an irrevocable order during a normal routine flight, due to an error caused by a technical fault, to bombard the Soviet Union. Despite desperate attempts to call the planes back and then to shoot them down, Moscow is destroyed. The American president in order to reinstate reciprocal trust and equilibrate the dissuasion gives orders to destroy New York.

This is the best film of the Nuclear Age for a very simple reason: it doesn't deal either with the effects of a nuclear war or a state of terror in a grotesque manner as though it were the "reality of madmen" (like Kubrick in *Dr Strangelove*). The film is about the essence, the core of the atomic situation, the need to save the Enemy in order to save oneself or should dissuasion fail, the impelling urgency to resort to virtually anything to prevent an atomic holocaust.

There are several crack lines throughout the film and many themes of maximum importance. The first has to do with the failure of technology at a time when it should be capable of controlling itself. The error detector fails together with the communications system between the Strategic Control and the bombardiers in the planes. What actually happens is that the "intelligence" in the technology goes haywire whereas its merely destructive features work to perfection.

Another fundamental point concerns the military-civilian relationship. Many of the officials presented have blind faith in their machines and their professionalism but others, significantly, higher-ranking individuals have serious doubts about the need to accumulate so many bombs and about granting so much autonomy to automatic procedures in the management of a crisis.

The two fundamental figures are Professor Groeteschele and the President. The first (in whom it isn't hard to recognise the "super hawk" characters such as H. Kahn or E. Teller) is a cold and cynical partisan in the rush towards arms; his deep seated anti communism has him wed theories of social Darwinism at a time when he insists that the United States could win a nuclear war against the USSR and survive, despite paying dearly with tens of millions of deaths. He asserts that "*every war, including thermonuclear war, must have a winner and a loser*"; he cites past massacres and genocides to justify the prospect of a nuclear war obviously without being aware of the innovations in the quality of nuclear weapons. The alienated nature of his reflections on death is clear: he makes it a game from which one gains a sense of cheap omnipotence. It is important to realise that this character is not by any means a caricature: there are abundant analysts and researchers at study in universities and research centres funded by the armed forces. Naturally he cannot but argue with the militaries, who are more concerned with the rush towards arms. This conversation takes place (during a meeting at the Pentagon) with General Black, the most sceptical about being able to manage any kind of nuclear conflict. Black says<sup>3</sup>:

B. "We're talking about the wrong subject. We've got to stoop war, not limit it";

Groeteschele answers:

G: "That is not up to us, Gen. Black"

B: "We're the ones who know most about it"

- "You're a soldier, Blackie. You carry out policy. You don't make it"

B. "Don't kid yourself, Stark. The way we say a war can be fought is making policy. If we say we can fight a limited war with nuclear weapons, all we do is let everyone off the hook. It's what they want to hear. We can just keep on what we're doing, and nobody really gets hurt. But you can't fight a limited war, and you know it"

G. "For my part, I'm not so sure"

B. "There's no such thing as a limited war anymore. Not with hydrogen bombs, there isn't. Once those bombs start to drop, you won't be able to limit a damn thing"

G. "Are you advocating disarmament, General Black?"

B. "I don't know"

G. "Well, it's the logic of your position" [...]

B. "We're going too fast. Things are getting out of hand. [...] We're all trying to make war more efficient. We now have the capacity to blow up the world several times over"

G. "Which does not mean we must do it"

B. "We won't be able to stop from doing it. That's the logic of your position, Groeteschele. We're setting up a war machine that acts faster than the ability of men to control it. We're putting men into situations that are getting too tough for men to handle"

G. "Then we must toughen the men"

- "Suppose they launch a first strike on us?"

B. "Then we retaliate and we're all finished"

G. "Oh, would you prefer that only we were finished?"

- "We have to prepare".

B. "We're preparing. We've got to slow down"

G. "I disagree. We have got to speed up. Naturally, that means taking risks, but our intention always is to minimise those risks. Of course, we can only control our own reactions. Our concept of limited war is based on an equal rationality on the part of the Russians. It also presupposes there will be no accidents on either side".

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<sup>3</sup> G.= Groeteschele; - = Another participant at meeting; B. = General Black

The difference of opinion between the two gets dramatic when it becomes clear that the attackers cannot be called back if the atomic bomb is used; at this stage the civil analyst tries to persuade the Minister for Defence and the President that one might as well take advantage of the situation and provoke a general attack:

G. "Every minute we wait works against us. Now, Mr. Secretary, now is when we must send in a first strike"

- "We don't go in for sneak attacks. We had that done at Pearl Harbour"

G. "And the Japanese were right to do it. From their point of view, we were their mortal enemy. As long as we existed, we were a deadly threat to them. Their only mistake was that they failed to finish us at the start and they paid for that mistake at Hiroshima"

- "You're talking about a different kind of war"

G. "Exactly. This time we can finish what we start. And if we act now, right now, our casualties will be minimal"

B. "Do you know what you're saying?"

G. "Do you believe that Communism is not our mortal enemy?"

B. "You're justifying murder"

G. "Yes, to keep from being murdered"

B. "In the name of what? To preserve what? Even if we do survive, are we better than we say they are? What gives us the right to live, then? What makes us worth surviving, Groteschele? That we are ruthless enough to strike first?"

G. "Yes! Those who can survive are the only ones worth surviving"

B. "Fighting for your life isn't the same as murder"

G. "Where do you draw the line once you know what the enemy is? How long would the Nazis have kept it up, General, if every Jew they came after had met them with a gun in his hand? But I learnt from them, General Black, oh I learnt"

B. "You learnt too well, Professor... You learnt so well that now there's no difference between you and what you want to kill"

This conversation summarises admirably the debate, which has animated military, industrial and academic circles for years; the survival of values detrimental for existence of the world has to invariably move on from an underestimation of the epochal novelty in the form of nuclear weapons and the forced analogy between different historic situations, which is clearly apparent in the highly emotional anti-Nazism of the analytical civilian. The much more rational nature of the general's realism emerges just as blatantly and is capable of distinguishing between one situation and another and has learnt that "*fighting for your life isn't the same as murder*".

The President, brilliantly interpreted by Henry Fonda, is the tragic hero of the story; his *alter-ego* is the Russian premier whose presence is confirmed only by a voice on the phone (simultaneously translated by an interpreter), ever more bewildered, angry and, in the end, alarmingly distressed. The two men are compelled to face the most serious crisis in present day and, probably, future history<sup>4</sup>: a war neither declared nor wanted, a war that isn't actually a war but which is perceived as such by the Russian side. The problem, therefore, is one of perception: the reparatory act by the Americans must reconstruct the friend/ enemy relationship, which in the nuclear era is a relationship of survival, not of destruction as in traditional war. No word, not even the most solemn, would suffice; what it would take is a sacrifice offered to the god- Bomb to let History have a future. Where arms fail or rather where they have betrayed to the greatest degree only Politics, great Politics can bring the situation back under control; politics of a kind that cannot but blend with Ethics; if it is ordained by Ethics that blood be spilt, the bloodshed must be sacrificial, it must constitute a turning point in human society.

*Fail Safe* tells us in an exemplary way that dissuasion is based on both fear and trust and one should have faith in the fear of the Enemy because that's what saves our lives. It also tells us that the invisibility of weapons, to be considered in the technical sense, as well as the loss of control over them by civilians, is the enemy of reciprocity, the basis for dissuasion. Finally, it tells us that the underlying mistake in nuclear militarism, beyond the moral misery common to all forms of war in general, is purely and simply the inability to understand the multiform and compound nature of war, where the total dependence on the physical reality in which it originates and develops is one of the essential characteristics of that nature.

#### 4.2 *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, USA. 1964. Directed by Stanley Kubrick.

The commander in chief of a B-52 bomber base, whose name is Ripper (reminiscent of Jack the Ripper), convinced that there is a Communist plot to conquer the world by contaminating the "vital fluids" of free men, orders one of his squads to bomb the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons. Despite all the efforts made to avoid a disaster, including a grotesque telephone conversation between an inept President of the United States and a totally drunk Pcus secretary, the American atomic bomb, led by the pilot T.J. "King" Kong, will fall on Russian soil. The latter scene has an incredible electrovalence and this is so not only in the entire film where poor undersized men prove themselves incapable of managing their own folly and the enormous technological machine dominating them, but also generally in

<sup>4</sup> The film doesn't say how History will continue after the bombing of New York and Moscow; it may be that the American President's decision will save humanity and start a new era in international relations.

the human condition. To Kubrick it seems that irony and the grotesque are the right key to interpretation of the atomic condition almost as if any other registration, including the catastrophic in certain forms of pacifism, is to be considered completely useless. In this sense the film is not at all political, it isn't suitable for the arousal of consciences but it is definitely an authentic masterpiece of the cinema where aesthetics and interpretation play an essential role in touching the emotional chords of the spectator, as is the intention of the director.

*Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove* are, it might be said even if somewhat exaggerated, the same film: the same characters, more or less the same plot, almost the same end. A strange coincidence: as fate would have it they came out the same year and were inspired by two different books, belonging to the wide Catastrophic trend of the late nineteen fifties and early sixties.

The question to be asked then is the following: which is the most appropriate clue to a description of that situation of madness or MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction), Lumet's realistic-tragic note or the grotesque tone of Kubrick? Lumet, wishing to stay close to reality and to narrate an "impossible" possibility (especially at the end with the reparatory holocaust offered by the American President to his Russian colleague) ends up being even more grotesque than Kubrick who, on the contrary, through irony and the aesthetic managed to use the right notes to make the spectator reflect while being amused at the same time. Since we are in the nineteen sixties one might say that the answer is blowin' in the wind, but in reality the question is rather important because, in this context, we are not dealing with war films but war communicated through the cinema. Therefore, we should probably sway the balance in favour of Lumet because he succeeds in explaining the dissuasive mechanism and the consequences of its eventual failure more effectively; because the characters, despite being a cinema pretence and the fact that it is futuristic political fiction, are sufficiently realistic to provide the spectator with ample cause for reflection. Kubrick wins from the point of view of cinema art but not on the score of war studies; it is more or less the same situation we noticed in the relationship between *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*; *realism versus idealism*, immersion in reality with all the risks of being overwhelmed by it, against refusal of reality with the risk of adopting the moral, attractive and ineffective attitude of mere observation. Here, idealism is disguised as a grotesque comedy; the catharsis offered by Kubrick, the bitter laughing through tight lips does not provide, in our opinion, either elements of knowledge or a clear awareness of the atomic situation.

## 5. War in its essence.

### 5.1 *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket*, a Clausewitz triad?

I believe it may be legitimately claimed that the three most important films on the Vietnam experience can be considered, among other things, an illustration of those elements set out by Clausewitz as inherent in war. So *Apocalypse Now* could be considered as the film with a "tendency to the extreme", *The Deer Hunter* as representative of the "individual case" and finally, *Full Metal Jacket* as the expression of the rationality expressed in the preparatory stages of war. As in the elaboration of the Prussian's theory, the elements taken into consideration are not in the pure state but exist in unison with others and they are mingled with other factors, which condition them and so these films cannot then be seen under just one single light. Nevertheless, organising them according to the perspective of Clausewitz' reflections may help to understand and appreciate them more.

### 5.2 *The Deer Hunter*, USA, 1978. Directed by Michael Cimino.

*"Unlike Coppola, Cimino doesn't want to tell the story of the war (for anyone who has lived through it, it isn't a communicable experience, for the others it is beyond comprehension) he is more interested in filming the 'epic account of a defeat' "*<sup>5</sup>.

So it is a case of conflict or better, if we have understood Clausewitz correctly, it is simply the relationship between war and reality, in the sense also of environment not modifiable by man. This film is not about war from the perspective of fanatical will, like *Apocalypse Now*, nor is it the object of a rational project, like *Full Metal Jacket*. We are simply told about what happens to men who go to war not to dominate it and not to be transformed by it but solely because that's how things are meant to be. It is therefore understandable that the leading players are chosen from among the "blue-collars", metal factory workers who face life in a direct way, also rough and somewhat coarse, without too many ideological overtones and intellectual sophistication. Vietnam hits them without mediation, with all the fierce fortuities that fate brings. Something that is raised to the nth power when they are tortured using the Russian roulette method, the fierce quintessence and synthesis of the entire human condition, both in war and in peace. One of the three leading players will never again be freed of that experience: he continues to gamble against death, the only way to feel alive and to contemporaneously rid himself of his nightmares, until reaching the desperate outcome.

Among the other two, Michael (De Niro) is the focus of attention. He is the only one who appears to survive the Vietnam experience, physically and mentally. Paradoxically, the war seems to have had an educational effect on him. He remains in army circles and even becomes a "green cap" in the special forces, but more than anything else he

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<sup>5</sup> Paolo Mereghetti (presented by), *Dizionario dei film 1996*, Milan, Baldini & Castoldi, 1995, pg. 235

changes his attitude towards violence. He actually gets to the stage where he rejects the gratuitous and superman aspect of it and spares a magnificent deer while out on a hunting expedition, but above all he assails one of those who had remained at home almost savagely when the latter toys with a pistol in a superficial and intimidating way. One gets the impression that the integrity of Michael's existential being has been consolidated by the war; this must not make us think that he is a militarist nor that the film is; it is just that he encountered a colossal amount of violence, he has sacrosanct respect for it and he has become convinced that it is one of the fundamental driving forces of life, together with others, however; in fact, it is thanks to him that the bonds of friendship among the mates shattered and scattered by the war can be renewed in an attempt to begin living again. In this sense Michael seems more mature and aware than the Joker in *Full Metal Jacket*. He is certainly not a hero: he is a rather ordinary man who "knows", who has learnt to recognise the hopeless ambiguity of life. So, if the film is an "epic account of a defeat", the defeat of Michael is somewhat unusual. He has definitely lost his innocence, the uncritical faith in America and that in his own virility in terms of overpowering and wicked behaviour, but he hasn't been overpowered or drained by the war. The reality surrounding him has changed and he adapts to it with great courage and painful awareness; his circle of friends will do the same in the harrowing final scenes, where they cling to hope and the desire to start all over as they sing for Nick, their freshly buried friend.

The journey of Michael, Nick and Steven and all the other members of the community is a voyage from a state of unawareness, from frivolousness, from a life of stereotyped thoughts and behaviour through the supreme collective experience, the war, to a new kind of seriousness, a sense of tragedy not intellectually devised but experienced at close quarters. In that sense, it is an excellent war film, precisely because it tells us, without being intellectual or moralistic, about one of the possible ways not how to get out of the war but how to live with it and, nonetheless, cope and continue to love.

### 5.3 *Apocalypse Now*, USA, 1979. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

The most profound film ever made about war is naturally based on a book; a book that is not about war, even though it is the story of a journey in the inferno of the human heart. That is *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad. The book talks about colonialism and slavery, but the background environment is of secondary importance. What counts is that in Conrad's book, as well as in Coppola's film, an attempt is made to reach the hard core of utter paranoia, of violence in its purest form, of the exploitation of man by man and of war as an integrally existential experience.

Let's look briefly at the story of the film. During the American phase of the long war in Vietnam Captain Willard is entrusted with the mission of tracing and killing Colonel Kurtz, who has abandoned the American army ranks, has cut himself off from the entire Western culture and who conducts a personal war against the Communist guerrillas, using ruthless methods. The Captain travels up a river with some mates in a boat and, in an increasingly hallucinogenic atmosphere he eventually finds Kurtz and carries out his mission, though sinking into a state of deep shock.

*Apocalypse Now* is a film about dissociations and detachments, from oneself and from one's own culture of reference. Captain Willard is a good example of this right from the first images, ambiguous enough to present him as a man who could easily be driven over the limit beyond which there is no return. From the very moment he is chosen for the assignment of the mission he plunges into a kind of hallucination consisting of rock music, alcohol and delirious fighting in the jungle: the blades of the ventilator in his room look like those both of a war helicopter and the vortices of his sick mind.

The beginning moments of the film take place in an atmosphere that is something in between relaxed and conspiratorial. Before dishes of prawns and glasses of *bourbon* Willard is told who Kurtz is, how to get to him but especially why it is necessary to "terminate the colonel's command". The General who assigns the mission to Willard justifies the need for it by the fact that Kurtz' ideas and methods have become "unsound". So a military officer involved like everyone else in one of the craziest and most erroneous wars of the nineteen hundreds, accuses (and condemns to death) a colleague for having stepped over a limit, of having crossed the boundary of "the better angels of our nature" and of having resolved his own interior conflict accepting and trusting his worst personal inclinations. This contradiction sums up the sense of the whole film and Western military culture. In fact this scene, more than many films, illustrates the ever-present possibility of a rift between political control and wartime violence; where political control is a lot more than the exercise of leadership on the part of civilians, it is the determination and management of acts of violence guided by a recognizable, if not rational project; that is, a project the reason for which is future peace and not the war being fought. When however, as happens to Kurtz, the rift is expended, the war is the end in itself, the political project turns its back on the future and goes headlong once again, disappearing into the experience of war. The latter becomes, or so it is perceived, a huge show of nothing other than the personality of the fighter, of his existential essence destined at any rate, as we will see, to fail.

Therefore, Kurtz has, in Clausewitz's language, separated the "climb to the extreme" from "reason" and so the state, which is America in this case, disowns him and condemns him to death because the antithesis is irremediable. Kurtz is against, wholly against what the State, even in war, represents or should force itself to represent: an actor summoned to link the past with the future through politics, at present represented by the war. Instead, Kurtz has chosen the present as the exclusive temporal setting and consequently, the war as the only means of communication, to the exclusion of any other alternative or connection with reality.

Kurtz sees the attempt by his “honourable” colleagues to keep the war as it really is separate from the war as one would like it to be as a demonstration of immense hypocrisy. He states this explicitly by means of his recorded voice, as though he were the stranger in stone, in a series of statements, which amount to a declaration of his philosophy of life, his theory of war and a clear-cut divorce from his former colleagues.

*“I watched a snail crawl along the edge of a straight razor; that’s my dream, that’s my nightmare: crawling, slithering along the edge of a straight razor and surviving”*

*“But we must kill them, we must incinerate them: pig after pig, cow after cow, villain after villain, army after army. And they call me an assassin. What do you call it when the assassins accuse the assassin? They lie. They lie, and we have to be merciful for those who lie. Those nabobs. I hate them. I do hate them.”*

And so Kurtz chooses to indulge **exclusively** in a kind of war, which the Western tradition has come across, given serious consideration to and even practised but against which it has also fought and, in any case, judged as needing ethical and political control: the total abandonment of the person one once was and the quest for a regeneration of one’s whole personality in contact with the most primordial elements of the war experience, those who speak the ancestral language of **integral** destruction of the enemy (to destroy the body, drink its blood, etc.), all this joined to the community experience of the fighters pushed to the maximum degree transforming it in a fraternity of blood and ideals. It is no coincidence that Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* happens in Vietnam; in that war the guerrilla experience reached its historic vertex. Guerrilla warfare is the kind of war, which best suits this choice of field, even if it is not the only one.

Kurtz in reality feels and reacts like a superman, like a religious devotee who professes in blind faith. As the General declares:

*“But out there with these natives, it must be a temptation to be God. [...] Everyman has got a breaking point [...] Walter Kurtz has reached his. [...] He’s out there operating without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct”.*

The sense of this film lies in the conflict between soldiers and warriors, between a sense of limit and the breaking of it, between war fought and war experienced intensely<sup>6</sup>. Willard fluctuated among these contradictions as though he were on quicksand. Willard is probably chosen because, in his raving disillusionment, he has something in common with Kurtz; he is a *borderline* soldier, a military apostate still connected to the *establishment* that tiny bit that suffices.

So he begins his mission, which doesn’t exist officially (because the State cannot admit that somebody drops out of it at that topical moment of its existence, the war); and he carries it out like a sort of Caronte, on board a boat travelling along a muddy river, which flows through Vietnam and Cambodia leading him to Kurtz and Hell.

From this moment on, the motivational heart of the film, we begin to unwind some threads (all of which unite in Kurtz in the end) representing just as many icons of both modern and eternal war: neither explanations nor illustrations but real “states of war” communicated by images, for example the fragmentation and the reassembly of Nature under the effect of arms. Nature in Vietnam has nothing idyllic or reassuring about it from the very beginning of the film. Those enormous and immobile trees seem primitive, totally extraneous to the human world. Their splitting and catching fire under shots from helicopters appearing in slow motion, yet most unexpectedly, does not inspire either pity or pain; here too there is a feeling of dissociation between man and the environment and of a longstanding conflict, practically impossible to solve. It isn’t surprising that the film ends with the same scene of trees ravaged by bombs. It will be like that throughout the whole film: from the encounter with the tiger to the progressive indistinctiveness of the landscape, ever more blurred and full of miasmas, more like the projection of an interior nightmare than something realistic, as far as Kurtz’s camp, a primordial decay comprising vegetable elements and rotting bodies. Nature in this film is what it is in reality: a war where everyone is against everyone else. The havoc wreaked by men seems to be absorbed as part of an indifferent everyday reality.

The journey continues still further into Vietnam, still further into an indistinct haze of terror. The boat is attacked by a multitude of arrows and lances: the past, physical and mental, is mixed with the present, the war emerges in all its existential timelessness. The landscape begins to look more and more like an enormous dumping ground full of what the war deposits here and there, like a gigantic centrifuge gone wild: corpses, bits of planes in flames, parachutes caught in trees. At long last one arrives at Kurtz’s hideout, full of soldiers without a sense of time, drawings like cave graffiti and armed with machine guns, bows and arrows. Everywhere there are beheaded heads, bodies hanging,

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to reaffirm something that is often said. If you consider the various problems involved in nuclear arms, it isn’t difficult to understand how subtle the dividing line between absolute war and the so-called war under political and ethical control is. Yet the borderline exists and it is decisive. All the theoretic notions underlying nuclear dissuasion (that is the pre-eminence of the threat to use rather than the effective use), all the legal considerations considering *ius in bello* and strategic observations are related to that line.

stagnant water tinged with blood. In this kingdom of Death, the man everyone is looking for, fears and venerates keeps people waiting: Willard, like Perceval, has to withstand tests before being introduced to him. Kurtz stays in the shade at all times, like a war god, a *deus absconditus*. The man who chose ruthlessness as clearness of expression is weary, ill, feeling that he has arrived at the end, defeated. I believe that the question inspired by the film arises at this stage: why does Kurtz feel defeated? Why, even though his methods of fighting are efficacious, does he invoke by means of an angry note marked on one of his writings, the Bomb (totally incongruent for a warrior like him) as the only way to win the war? Why doesn't he obstruct Willard's attempt to kill him?

*"Have you ever considered any real freedoms? Freedom from the opinion of others? Even the opinion of yourself? Did they say why, Willard? Why they wanted to terminate my command?" [...] "What did they tell you?"*

*"They told me that you had gone totally insane and that your methods were unsound".*

*"Are my methods unsound?"*

*"I don't see any methods at all, sir".*

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*I have seen the horrors, horrors that you've seen, but you have no right to call me a murderer. You have a right to kill me, you have a right to do that, but you have no right to judge me. It's impossible for words to describe what is necessary to those who do not know what horror means. Horror...horror has a face and you must make a friend of horror. Horror and moral terror are your friends; if they are not then they are enemies to be feared. They are truly enemies."*

I think that the sense of these statements is quite clear. War is a fact of essentiality for Kurtz. If the essence of war is horror, then that becomes the code, the paradigm for the relationship with oneself and the enemy. Recalling the episode in which the Vietcong some time earlier cut off the arms of children vaccinated against polio of the Americans in his charge, he says:

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*I never want to forget it. And then I realised like I was shot...I was shot with a diamond, a diamond bullet right through my forehead, and I thought "My God, the genius of that, the genius. They will do that: perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure". And then I realised they were stronger than me because they could stand it. These were not monsters, these were men, trained cadres. These men who fought with their hearts, who have families, who have children, who are filled with love that they had the strength .....the strength to do that. [...] You have to have men who are moral and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgement.....without judgement Because it's judgement that defeats us."*

Kurtz saw men handle an enormous amount of violence without, in his opinion, ceasing to be men, that is, people who possess values and coherent ideas. In that sense he has, it seems to me, much in common with Ernst Junger in "In Stahlgewittern". There too, certain men passed through the flesh grinder of the First World War coming out of it moulded, purified and not reduced to numbed creatures full of fear. It is this that torments Kurtz: to see that someone can ride the tiger of war without being devoured by it. To begin with, the fact is that Kurtz isn't capable of conforming to this ideal model. He has experimented with horror and feels overwhelmed by it, he feels incapable of facing it; it is for this reason he feels he's a failure and he wants to die. Horror was a cultural shock for him: seeing an intransigent morality committed to the utmost violence made him evaluate his own personal inadequacy as a Westerner used to asking himself questions.

What is really decisive is the objective aspect of the entire question: what Kurtz considers to be weakness (moral scruples, politics, the entertainment of doubts) is actually recognition of the complexity of the real and what he believes to be strength in the pure state is only paranoia. This is not a moralistic judgement; it's recognition of what happens when war and the warrior divorce decisively from politics, from the recognition and exploitation of the infinite possibilities of the real. The war spirit distilled to the maximum grade ignores the conditioning of the real, which definitely exists: otherwise the first war in History would have been the last, it would have devoured all mankind and hence itself. I believe that Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* is a cipher for war, which implodes within, for the Nothingness of pure violence, annihilating because, if violence is a modification of the Real, modification cannot take place without preserving something of that which has been modified; the total subordination to death, to be instruments of death totally leaves nothing to fill the physical and mental emptiness, which it gradually creates around itself. This seems to me to be the essence of what I would define as militarist nihilism, which Kurtz upholds even if he is aware and hence desperate.

After killing Kurtz (at the same time a buffalo was being slaughtered: both scapegoats or totemic animals), Willard becomes the object of religious respect for the tribe of assassins surrounding him. However, he is too exhausted, he also goes beyond this last stage of historic and psychological regression and starts his journey back on the boat. "*The horror, the horror*" are the last words said by Kurtz that Willard recalls, as he no longer answers the radio

calls coming from the other world, the civil one that for him makes no sense now. The leading actor of this “upside down” Divine Comedy goes towards the darkness of madness and definitely not to any kind of light.

#### 5.4 *Full Metal Jacket*, USA, 1987. Directed by Stanley Kubrick.

If *Apocalypse Now* is a film about paranoia, FMJ is a film about schizophrenia, about the clear-cut, obsessive separation of mental universes with the object of power. The film itself is clearly divided in two, split between the first part (the training of the recruits) and the second (the involvement in the Vietnam war). The first separation happens in relation to the psychology of the recruits. Their personalities are squashed and annihilated by the sergeant-instructor who performs a century-old experiment on them; he imposes a death-rebirth cycle on them; the death of the human being with his complexes and weaknesses and rebirth in the form of a *killer* serving the fatherland.

It is important to realise that the intention behind the military training is not to create robots (in the film the instructor states this explicitly) but *killers* with hearts of stone; there is a substantial difference because robots don't have values whereas soldiers **must** have values, which are largely like those in civilian life (hence with their fair share of ethics) but completely emptied of all critical capacities and their individual, distinctive traits completely transformed. So, for example, equality exists in the barracks and it is always subject to the death/rebirth cycle: the first quip “*here nobody's worth a fuck*” and later “*you are marines*”. The same for their sexuality: the recruits are “married” to their guns, weapons substitute women (subsequently, there are only “females”) as the givers of life (for the *marine*) and of death for the enemy. The same applies for religion. The soldier's task is to kill as many enemies as possible in order to donate as many souls as possible to God..... It isn't far removed from, at least as regards the final outcome, the purpose of every missionary.

Naturally, the essential, cardinal point to the whole training process is the relationship with death. It is important to realise that the recruit is inculcated with the idea that he will never be alone either before or after death. Beforehand he has his weapons and fellow soldiers by his side and afterwards, he will live again in the permanence, allegedly eternal, of the marines (or other military corps in any other army).

“*The corps (marines) can't die, you won't die*”,

the instructor declares. This point is of capital importance because it explains amply *ad abundatiam* the fascination with uniforms and the effects of **war experienced**, not just **suffered**, by men. The greatest dispenser of death ever invented wraps up (by means of man's cultural sophistication) the extreme outcome in a nice gift pack, rendered attractive because of the domination of death by means of weapons and of its submission through memory of the transfigured dead soldier. Basically, what people fear most about the transition is the solitude and the oblivion; the military universe offers not only consolation but a genuine solution for this situation.

I would like to return to the robot as opposed to *killer* question. The only recruit who doesn't succeed in transforming himself is the one who ends up becoming a robot; the only thing he manages to do is shoot, like an automatic weapon might do. He can't assimilate the new values and consequently, explodes like a faulty bomb in a mad fit of homicide and suicide, killing the instructor in a kind of parricide.

The fact that the main character, or rather the personification of “I”, the film narrator, is called Joker (the extra playing card in a pack) is not a coincidence, in my opinion. He is no hero, he doesn't withstand the training, he wants to join the marines and go to Vietnam. He manages to maintain some measure of aloofness, through humour and reflection, amid all that he has to go through. The fact that he appears to be somewhat intellectual (he writes for *Stars and Stripes*, the American Armed Forces' newspaper... at any rate he writes) and that he has the writing “Born to kill” and the International emblem for Peace on his helmet makes him the only **real** man in a circus of figures involved in a play where madness is normal and normality (his, to be precise) is totally crazy. As already said, his normality does not prevent him from being **almost** like all the others. In this sense, it may be said that he is just like the son of Captain Miller in Spielberg's *Ryan* where the father was able to express his values even through war whereas his son isn't capable. In fact, in order to express his more personal values, he must make do with symbols, half sentences and quips and a gesture of mercy in the end, which tragically is the killing of the young girl-sniper. We get an impression from all this of the abyssal distance, in every sense of the term, between the Second World War and the Vietnam Inferno.

The second part concerns the actual involvement in the war. It has the same observant approach in the manner of an autopsy: whilst the first part showed us how men are trained to fight in battles, in the second part we see that training put to the test. Above all, we are shown the resilience of those new psychological mechanisms, which were instilled throughout the training period. Death is not the only threat to balance, there is a whole array of senselessness typical of the army under pressure: boorish propaganda, a completely contorted sexuality, humour limited to the obscene. To this effect there are many grotesque details: a style convention widely used previously in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* . A noticeable feature on the one hand is the substantial resilience of the comradeship bond (a real life saver) and on the other hand, the chance happenings: many of the deaths we see are due to the incidence of fortuitous events. The final part of the film gravitates around the episode of the clash with the sniper, a little woman (sexual nemesis?) with an exceptionally accurate aim. The eruption of death with such precision threatens to disrupt the resilience of the team: munitions are wasted and there are signs of disobedience. Only the death of the Commander brings unity of purpose back to the group, which attacks and thwarts the sniper. Before the final act (whether to fire the fatal shot or not and

who should do it) the group shows signs of disagreement again. Joker solves his own moral dilemma with much ambiguity: it is quite clear that he himself does not know whether to shoot out of mercy, hatred or to avoid being excluded from the bond of solidarity between his companions.

One thing for certain is that when Joker sings the Micky Mouse anthem with his comrades in the closing scenes and offstage he says:

*"I live in a world of shit, that's for sure. But I'm alive and I'm not afraid"*

he seals his nature as a universal soldier on one hand and on the other gives Kubrick the chance, in a scene without either time or place (it could be the war of the twenty-fifth century...) to tell us that the permanence of war, its eternity thrives on mechanisms all the more effective because they are simple, direct and are related to the basic requirements of human psychology.

**5. 5 The Hurt Locker, USA, 2008. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow.**

It should not seem strange that after three "vietnamese" movies, a film set in Iraq appears in this section. The urban guerrilla has many more points of contact with the one fought between forests and rice fields than might appear at first sight. Buildings, streets, crumbling walls and piles of rubbish left along the streets are hiding and threats as effective as trees, swamps and underbrush. The unpredictability is the same, the loneliness and stress of the fighter, too. As one of the protagonists says:

*"Anyone comes alongside a Humvee we're dead. Anybody even looks at you funny we're dead. Pretty much the bottom line is if you're in Iraq, you're dead"*

In this scenario, Kathryn Bigelow accompanies us with an excellent film, almost documentary technique, following several days of service of a team of EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal), bomb disposal experts to find and render ineffective the deadly IED (Improvised Explosive Devices), consisting of unexploded bombs and grenades equipped with a primer or by remote control. These weapons, hidden in the most varied places, from cars to drain covers, from plastic bags to the piles of rubble never cleared, are the true protagonists of the war and the major responsible for losses among civilians and Western troops.

The team is made up of soldiers James, Sanborn and Eldridge: but the first is the true protagonist and driving force of history. William James joins the team to replace a colleague killed in an explosion and immediately shows a very tough stuff. It is not just a matter of professionalism and expertise, however, demonstrated the highest degree in the succession of missions: it is rather the fact that James seems to take pleasure in facing death, appears at ease only when it has to cope with bombs ready to explode. So recalling to the viewer the quote, by New York Times war correspondent Chris Hedges, set at the beginning of the film and that James seems perfectly tailored:

*"The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug"*

But things are not so simple and William James is not a psychopath on the hunt for medals, as well as the film is not merely a thriller with simplistic effects. The context in which the characters move is characterized by a kind of aridity, of dehumanization rather peculiar and characteristic of urban warfare: they are the essential machinery to act (the film opens with a "subjective" of a remote-controlled robot), or otherwise inanimate objects transformed into bomb, all immersed in a blinding light and stunning heat. In this scenario the soldiers are alone and naked albeit wrapped in their heavy battle suits. The enemy appears, but certainly not to go down in a duel face to face: there are remote controlled detonations or actions of sniping instead. So, there are no battles but only a long strain of ambushes. This film, therefore, reduces the war to the essential, to a bare and desperate struggle for survival that is threatened by more things than men. It slams this kind of war on viewer's face, but above all requires the characters to deal with it. And here James, the protagonist, finds the reason, the source of his feeling to be able to survive, to overcome this challenge: in this confrontation between him, with his hands, his nerves and his ability, and the destructive force of the explosive power of the war expressed at full range and immediacy. Here, I believe, is the source of what a casual viewer might mistake for excitement. James, armed only with himself, riding the tiger of war: what he finds is the taste of his own life, every time, after any disengagement, saved and restored.

But we have the evidence that it is not a cheap "machismo", or a narcissistic and lonely search for meaning to his own life, when James finds the corpse of a child turned, in a body-bomb with stuffed stomach of explosives. Rebellious against this deep degradation of a human being to something less valuable than an inanimate object, against this rape, one might say, of the human dignity, he defuses the biological bomb and returns the corpse to his being human, obligatory subject at least of an elementary compassion.

In a word James fights, like everyone else, to dominate the death but his it is not a sort of supermanliness, but, we would like to say, style, or awareness raised to a very high degree. And so other figures in the filmography of war come to mind, both of characters that look like James, both figures that turn away. Thus, if the Nick of *The Deer Hunter* is a true addict-of-war and no longer able to break free from cruel game which the Viet Cong forced him and only in this he

seems to find meaning of his life, James, who seems a drug war but it is not really, looks like the Mike in the same Cimino's movie. Both of them, in confrontation with death experienced daily (in a condition far from that of civilian life) find in the war the measure of themselves, and get out of it neither elated nor depressed, but just the highest degree aware of the tragic human condition. Sure, the mismatch of William James is more serious than Mike's, who has the chance to have friends and a love that maybe in time will give him a bit of fragility and humanity closer to the usual experience. On the contrary the protagonist of *The Hurt Locker* is unable to explain himself to his comrade Sanborn in a dialogue sparked by the confession of the latter willing a son to overcome his probable death:

S. "I mean, how do you do it, you know? Take the risk ... "

J. "I do not know. I just ... I guess I do not think about it"

S. "But you realize every time you suit up, every time we go out, it's life or death. You roll the dice and you deal with it. You recognize that, don't you? "

J. "Yeah, I do. But I don't know why. You know why I am the way I am? "

and then confesses to his son his submission to the war as the only experience that can measure himself, almost a compulsion to repeat; and in fact he will leave for another year of service. In this sense William James is almost a perfect figure and icon of post-modern war, where many of the meanings, senses and values of the wars of past times have vanished and the naked human soldier is called to face his own fragility alone, waiting for the times when only robots will fight:

*"You know what, buddy? Once you get older, some of the things that you love might not seem so special anymore. Like your Jack in the Box. Maybe you realize it's just a piece of tin and a stuffed animal and then you forget the few things you really love. And by the time you get to my age maybe it's only one or two things...with me I think it's one."*

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